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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ARTICLES

PAVEL AVETISYAN, CHRISTINE CHATAIGNER, GIULIO PALUMBI. <i>The Results of the Excavations of Nerkin Godedzor (2005-2006). Preliminary Report</i>	6-18
STEPHAN KROLL. <i>Southern Armenia Survey (Syunik) 2000-2003</i>	19-49
ARSEN BOBOKHYAN. <i>Das Phänomen „Hortfund“ im früh- und mittelbronzezeitlichen Kulturkontext Kaukasiens</i>	50-71
ARAM KOSYAN. <i>Arnuwandas I in the East</i>	72-97
NICOLAY HARUTYUNYAN. <i>Different Weapons in Urartian Cuneiform Inscriptions</i>	98 -104
HAYK AVETISYAN, WILFRID ALLINGER-CSOLLICH. <i>The Fortress of Aramus: Preliminary Report of Excavations in 2004 and 2005</i>	105-134
ALTAN ÇILINGIROĞLU. <i>An Urartian Fortress in Front of Mount Eiduru: Ayanis</i>	135-142
VELI SEVIN. <i>A Comment on the so-called Urartian Capital City of Toprak Kale</i>	143-149
YERVAND GREKYAN. <i>The Will of Menua and the Gods of Urartu</i>	150-195
JOHN GREPPIN. <i>Substratum in Armenian</i>	196-201
ARTAK MOVSISYAN. <i>Die sogenannte „Erimena Tafel“</i>	202-207
LEVON ABRAHAMIAN. <i>Hero Chained in a Mountain: On the Semantic and Landscape Transformations of a Proto-Caucasian Myth</i>	208-221
ARMEN PETROSYAN. <i>Haldi and Mithra / Mher</i>	222-238
TORK DALALYAN. <i>On the Character and Name of the Caucasian Satana (Sat'enik)</i>	239-253

BOOK REVIEWS

URSULA SEIDL. <i>Bronzekunst Urartus (S. Hmayakyan, Y. Grekyan)</i>	254-260
FREDERIC KORTLANDT, ROBERT S.P. BEEKES. <i>Armeniaca, Comparative Notes (T. Dalalyan)</i>	261-262
ARMENIAN SUMMARIES	263-278
ABBREVIATIONS	279-281

HALDI AND MITHRA/MHER*

Armen Petrosyan

The subject of this article is an illustrative example of how important it is to join the efforts of the “eastern” and “western” scholars in the study of the complex problems of antiquity. In this view, we would like to stress, once again, the purpose of our journal: to make the works of scholars from different countries available and understandable to one another.

Igor Diakonoff was first to write about the Urartian-Armenian roots of Mithraism. This author was known and acknowledged both in the West and in the Soviet Union, yet nevertheless, his study remained unnoticed to the western Armenologists and specialists in Mithraism. On the other hand, Diakonoff, as he himself confessed (1991, personal), had no sufficient knowledge of the Armenian epic for a proper analysis of the relevant material. Thus, the issue discussed in this article may serve as a link between not only eastern and western scholars but also between specialists in various disciplines: Urartian, Iranian, Caucasian, and Armenian studies, as well as experts in mythology and epic.

THE GOD/HERO (RE)BORN FROM THE ROCK/STONE

The ancient Armenian epics end with a story about the hero who was killed but then was miraculously brought back to life, or incarcerated in a rock/mountain cave and aspired to get out of there. These heroes are regarded as the epic versions of the “dying” or “dying and rising” god. The typical examples are Ara the Handsome of the ethnogonic myth (Xorenac’i I.15), Artawazd of the “Vipasank” (Xorenac’i II.51), Mušel Mamikonean of the “Persian War” (P’awstos Buzand V.36) and Mher the Younger of the “David of Sasun.”¹

The rebirth of the hero from the rock is a variant of his birth from the rock/stone. These motifs are widespread in the epic folklore of the peoples of the Caucasus. The birth of a mythological character from the rock is also known from Phrygian mythology: Agdistis/Agdos, the ancestor of Attis, who represents the Phrygian cognate of the

*This article represents an abridged and revised version of Petrosyan 2004.

¹ For the English translations of the epic of Sasun, see, e.g., Shalian 1964; Surmelian 1964.

Armenian Ara the Handsome,² is born in this way (Pausanias VII.17.10; Arnobius V.5). An earlier representative of this figure is the monster Ullikummi in Hurrian mythology, son of the god Kumarbi and the rock.³

The name Mher is derived from the pre-Christian Armenian theonym Mihr borrowed from Iranian (Middle Iran. *Mihr* < *Miθra*), yet deep pre-Iranian roots can be traced in his character. On the top of the rock of Van, where Mher the Younger was believed to be imprisoned, there is an Urartian blind portal with a large cuneiform inscription on it, dated from the end of the 9th century BC. This is the only text representing the whole Urartian pantheon and the order of sacrifices offered to the gods. The inscription begins as follows: ⁴*Haldie eurie "Išpuiniše "Sardurihiniše "Menuaše "Išpunihiniše inili KÁ z/ṣaduali* ("Išpuini, son of Sarduri, [and] Menua, son of Išpuini, built this gate for the god Haldi, the Lord").⁴ Mher the Younger enters this very "gate" and must exit from it in the future. The Armenians called this "gate of Haldi" *Mheri duř* 'Door of Mher.' According to Diakonoff,

*This doubtlessly means [...] that under Achaemenian rule or a bit later Haldi was identified with Mithra. [...] The religion of Mithra, in the form in which it reached Rome in the 1st century BC, had nothing to do with the concept of Mithra existing in Zoroastrian Iran except for the name of the deity [...]; also, the luminous character of the "Western" and Iranian Mithra, and his friendliness towards people were common. The main qualities of the Roman Mithra are different: the Roman Mithra is born from the rock and goes out of it; place of worship is a niche or a grotto (spelaeum); he performs many exploits searching for the holy bull, including his metamorphosis, as it seems, into a lion. Slaughtering the bull [...], he sheds its blood on the ground, thus endowing it, apparently, with fertility. [...] The birth from the rock ("the door of the god") and a part of the complex of the Western Mithra's attributes, namely the sapling, the lion and, possibly, the bull, can be traced from the Roman Mithra to the eastward to Haldi but not further.*⁵

² For the relationship between Ara the Handsome and Attis, see Matikian 1930: 288; Adontz 1946: 381ff.

³ For the relation of Ullikummi and Caucasian heroes, see Ardzinba 1985.

⁴ KUKN 38_{1,2}.

⁵ Diakonoff 1983: 191-193, 303-304. Then he adds: "Note that in Phrygia, the alleged birthplace of the Western Mithra, 'doors of the god' were also made in the rock at least as early as the 8th-7th centuries BC [...]; a syncretization of Haldi with a so far unknown Phrygian god may have preceded the further syncretization of this already syncretic deity with Mithra." However, as we shall see, looking for such an intermediate link is not necessary. Diakonoff has expressed his view elsewhere too: cf., e.g., "The supreme god of the Mithraic religion had nothing in common with the Mithra of Indo-Iranians except for his name. This religion, apparently, appeared in Eastern Asia Minor and Western Armenia in the 1st century BC, and was only slightly influenced by Zoroastrianism" (Diakonoff *et al.* 1989: 339). It should be noted that the "Door of Mher" had been compared with the Mithraic spelaea earlier: see Boyle 1978.

THE ROMAN MITHRAS

Mithraism as a religious doctrine appeared in the Roman Empire in the 1st century AD. It became widespread throughout the Empire, including Numidia and Britannia, from the mid 2nd century, especially among legionaries and marginal social groups (freedmen, slaves, and traders). Women were forbidden the cult. Mysteries were dedicated to Mithra; his priests promised resurrection and immortality of soul to their followers. In 307, Mithra was declared *Sol invictus* (“Invincible Sun”) in Rome. In the 3rd century Mithraism competed with Christianity. Contending against Mithras, whose worship included such elements as the legend of the new-born god and the belief in the rapture to heaven, the Roman Church adopted the birthday of Mithras (December 25) as the day of Jesus Christ’s birth.

The cult of Mithras was conducted in special temples (*mithraea*), with the image of Mithras killing a bull placed in the center. In addition to that scene, there could be represented other episodes of Mithras’ life. Usually, the birth of Mithras from the rock was pictured, as well as Mithras dragging the bull into a cave, plants grown from the blood and seed of the bull, Mithras and the sun god (Sol) feasting, Sol endowing Mithras with the full power of the sun, Mithras and Sol shaking hands at the flaming altar. Our knowledge of Mithraism is greatly based on these scenes, because almost no relevant texts exist.

Franz Cumont (1868–1947) was the first to study Mithraism. In his fundamental works dedicated to the texts, monuments and mysteries of Mithras, he attempted to demonstrate the Iranian basis of the Roman Mithraism. However, he himself was conscious of the deficiencies in his theory, viz., the absence of a special cult, liturgy and iconography of Mithra, as well as of the central theme of Mithraism, the sacrifice of the bull, in the Iranian tradition. Subsequently, other theories on the genesis of Mithraism appeared. Mithraism is a complex religion, and not all of its manifestations can be traced back to eastern roots. Nevertheless, such roots obviously existed.

Based on the Mithraic bas-reliefs, Cumont endeavored to restore the key episodes of the “legend of Mithras.”⁶ Let us briefly summarize his reconstruction, dividing it into the following points:

1. Mithras is born from the rock.
2. Only the shepherds hidden on the neighboring mountain become witnesses to his birth.⁷

⁶ Cumont 1956: 130 ff. This reconstruction, like any other, is to some extent hypothetical. Further elaboration is possible, but that will not change the general picture.

⁷ Some scholars regard this episode as the prototype of the Christian legend of the Adoration of Christ by shepherds.

3. First, he measures his strength with the sun god, who acknowledges Mithras' superiority. Mithra rewards him with a luminous crown and concludes a solemn friendly agreement with him.
4. Mithras' most significant adventure is his combat with the bull. At first Mithras defeats the bull and drags it into his cave, which serves him as home, but the bull, apparently, frees itself. Mithras kills the bull with his hunting-knife.
5. The bull is slaughtered by the Sun's order, which he sends by the raven, his messenger. The raven is one of the most important symbols of Mithraism.⁸
6. Mithras becomes the creator of everything useful on the earth. From the body of the sacrifice all useful plants grow, and from his sperm all useful animals originate. The death that Mithras causes gives birth to a new life, richer and more fertile than the old one.
7. Furthermore, Mithras helps the first humans during the drought. However, another punishment befalls them: the deluge, from which only one man is saved in a boat (cf. the legend of Noah). After the last supper with the Sun and his companions, Mithras ascends to heaven, from where he protects those who believe in him.

It is also important to note that:

8. Mithras is connected with the grapes and wine. According to one notion, Mithras is born from the rock, holding a bunch of grapes in his hand.⁹
9. Mithras' temples were underground constructions made similar to the caves (*spelaea*).
10. Mithraic iconography includes statues with man's body and lion's head (cf. the name of the fourth degree of Mithraic initiation: *Leo* 'Lion').

THE EPIC MHER

There are two Mhers in the standard versions of the epic of Sasun: Mher the Elder (or: Lion Mher) and Mher the Younger, the grandfather and the grandson. They both are derived from the same archetype.¹⁰ Both are great heroes and possessors of the

⁸ In the cult of the western Mithras there were seven degrees of initiation, and the devotees successively assumed the names of Raven (*Corax*), Occult, Soldier, Lion, Persian, Runner of the Sun, and Father (Cumont 1956: 152 ff.).

⁹ Cumont 1956: 131. For the Dionysiac associations of Mithras, see Campbell 1968: 215 ff., 240 f. Notably, in one of the Greek recensions of Agathangelos, the Armenian god Mihr is represented as Dionysus, see Garitte 1946: 129.

¹⁰ Abeghian, Melik-Ohanjanyan 1951: 859. It is interesting that in the ethnogonic myth, too, the figure of the resurrecting god is split into two heroes: Ara the Handsome and his son bearing the same name. S. Ahyan (1982: 268ff.) and J. Dumézil (1994: 133ff.) connect this repetition with the peculiarity of Ara the Handsome's character as a representative of the third function of Dumézil's theory.

fiery horse and the lightning sword of Sanasar, Mher the Elder's father and the fore-father of the heroes' kin.

Below are listed the parallels between the Western Mithras and the Elder and Younger Mhers in accordance with the above points.

1. In the finale of the epic of Sasun, Mher the Younger finds that the earth cannot sustain his steps and support the hooves of his horse (it has become soft because of the evil of the time). He enters the rock of Van through the "Door of Mher." He must go out of there when justice and fertility reign in the world. Once or several times in a year, on the feast days (e.g., Transfiguration, Ascension), the "Door of Mher" opens and he exits to find out whether or not the ground can bear him.
2. Once a shepherd is present at the opening of the "Door of Mher," i.e., he becomes a witness to Mher's "rebirth." Mher tells him when he is going to come out from the rock.
3. Mher the Elder meets only one worthy adversary: Melik' the Elder, the king of Egypt. None of them is able to defeat the other, so after a long combat they conclude a treaty. This is the only treaty concluded by the heroes of Sasun.¹¹
4. Mher the Elder learns that he cannot defeat the White Monster who has captured his bride, if he doesn't kill the Black Bull. He finds the bull and kills it with his sword. This episode can shed light upon the problem of the origin of the key myth of Mithraism, the slaughter of the bull by Mithras. The epic of Sasun was first recorded in the 19th century, but this motif has ancient roots in Armenia (see below), and, given the historical context, it is impossible to imagine a reverse process, namely that the Armenians borrowed it from the western Mithraism.
5. The "Door of Mher" is situated on the "Raven's Stone" (*Ag'avu K'ar*). At the end of his wandering, Mher wounds a raven, who leads him to the imaginary cave inside the "Door of Mher" on the "Raven's Stone" of the rock of Van.¹²
6. Mher the Younger tells the shepherd that he will go out of the rock when the new era of fertility comes, "when the wicked world is destroyed and rebuilt, when the wheat grows to the size of a rose-pod, when the barley grows to the size of a walnut."¹³

¹¹ Interestingly, there is certain evidence allowing us to suppose that the mythological archetype of Melik' the Elder was the sun god: see Petrosyan 1997: 44.

¹² The raven also figures in the ends of other Caucasian heroes born from the stone/rock: see, for instance, Avdalbegyan 1969: 47-48; Chikovani 1966: 217; Vrshaladze 1976: 82; Salakaja 1976: 204, 218; Ivanov 1976: 161. See also Boyle 1978: 71f. Interestingly, the "meeting of the hero with the raven" motif may be traced back to the Sumerian composition *Enlil and Namzitara*, where Namzitara meets the supreme god Enlil disguised as a raven. The god promises that Namzitara's descendants will "seize" the justice *si-sa*: see Afanasieva 1997: 320-321, 451 (cf. Mher the Younger will go out from the rock when justice is established in the world).

¹³ Shalian 1964: 371.

7. Some episodes of the “legend of Mithras” and the epic of Sasun are similar to the finish of the Akkadian “Gilgameš” epic. Gilgameš and his friend Enkidu kill the powerful heavenly bull sent by Ištar against them. After the death of his friend, Gilgameš puts on a lion skin (cf. Lion Mher) and roams the world in search of immortality (cf. the figure of the wandering Mher the Younger, who enters the rock and becomes immortal). He reaches Mount Mašu and passes to the lands beyond that mountain.¹⁴ Finally, he meets Utnapisti, the Mesopotamian Noah, who was saved from the deluge and received immortality from the gods.¹⁵
8. Mher the Elder stays drunken in Egypt for seven years, and Mher the Younger, unaware of his father’s death, drinks with his peers.
9. Mher the Younger dwells in the imaginary cave of the “Door of Mher.”
10. Mher the Elder is called *Ariwc* ‘Lion’ or *Ariwcajew* ‘Lion-shaped.’¹⁶

THE URARTIAN HALDI

Haldi was the supreme god of Urartu. His worship was superior to other cults to such an extent that G. Łap'anc'yan (Kapancjan) called it “Haldomania.”¹⁷ He was the patron of the royal dynasty, the commander of the troops, the giver of victory etc.¹⁸ He is connected with fire and can even be identified as a god of fire: on a bronze shield from the fortress of Upper Anzaf he is depicted in tongues of flame blazing up from his whole body.¹⁹ The city of Ardin (in Assyrian sources: Musasir), the center of the cult of Haldi, was situated beyond the borders of the Urartian kingdom, southwest from Lake Urmia.²⁰

Let us now compare, point by point, what we know about Haldi with the characteristics of the Western Mithras and Mher.

1. In the Urartian period the “Door of Mher” was dedicated to Haldi. Apparently, during festivals he came out of the rock through that door, like Mher the Younger.²¹ This associates him with the “dying and rising” gods.

¹⁴ According to one opinion, these lands can be localized in the Armenian Highland: see, e.g., Lipinski 1971: 49-50.

¹⁵ For the ancient Near Eastern elements of the Armenian epic, see Petrosyan 2002.

¹⁶ This epithet has also been explained as “Lion-tearer”: see Harutyunyan 2000: 44.

¹⁷ Kapancjan 1940: 114.

¹⁸ For the cult of Haldi, see Hmayakyan 1990: 33ff.

¹⁹ Belli 1999: 37ff.

²⁰ The name Haldi is referred to in an Aramaic inscription from the Mannean kingdom southeast of Urartu (Lemaire 1998: 21-22; Teixidor 1997/98: 734). One may suppose that the cult of Haldi was not exclusively Urartian: see Salvini 2001: 354. For a discussion of how Haldi’s cult could have penetrated Manna, see Tiratsian 2001: 10-12.

²¹ Diakonoff 1983: 192.

3. See below, point 10.
4. See below, point 10.
5. In the inscription of a seal belonging to Urzana, king of Musasir, that city is described as “the city of Raven, which, like a serpent, opened its mouth in the Enemy Mountains.”²²
6. Haldi obviously was a god of fertility.²³ This is corroborated by the information on numerous animal sacrifices and festivals of harvest before his “gates.”
7. See below, point 10.
8. Festivals dedicated to Haldi and sacrifices offered to him are known in connection with planting of vineyards. Haldi was the god of viticulture and wine-making as well.²⁴
9. The usual place of the worship of Haldi were the “gates of Haldi.” He, apparently, dwelled in the cave inside the rock, like Mher.
10. In Urartian art, the images of the lion and the bull side by side are of frequent occurrence. The great gods were depicted standing on those animals. Moreover, lions tearing bulls are known in Urartian zoography.²⁵ It has been surmised that the lion represented the symbol of Haldi, while the bull, as in the ancient cultures of Urartu’s neighbors, was the symbol of the thunder god (Urartian Teišeba).²⁶ Now it is clear that those symbols are ambiguous²⁷ (e.g., on the shield from Upper Anzaf, Haldi leads the troops on foot while Teišeba follows him on a lion and the sun god Šiuini goes on a bull). However, we can hardly doubt that the lion, king of animals often, if not even always, or in a certain stage of the history of Urartu, represented Haldi, the king of the gods.²⁸ The fight between the lion and the bull apparently corresponds to the combat between the gods whose symbols those two animals represented.

²² Thureau-Dangin 1912: XII, n. 3. There are also other readings of this text.

²³ Hmayakyan 1990: 33, 35.

²⁴ Hmayakyan 1990: 10, 76-78; Petrosyan 2006.

²⁵ Piotrovskij 1962: 111 (the author indefinitely calls the attacking animal a “predator” but, as the late S.A. Yesayan kindly confirmed, it is doubtlessly a lion); Yesayan *et al.*, 1991: 17.

²⁶ Piotrovskij 1959: 223; Diakonoff 1983: 193; Hmayakyan 1990: 35.

²⁷ Calmeyer 1983: 182; Salvini 1995: 189-190, with bibliography.

²⁸ The lion is the symbol uniting Haldi and Mher the Elder with other embodiments of the “resurrecting” god. In Armenian folklore, the legendary hero Mušel Mamikonean, too, was called “Lion” (Srvandzyantz 1982: 95); supposedly he, like Ara the Handsome, was brought back to life with the help of the *Aralezk'*, the mythical dog-like creatures who licked the wounds of killed heroes and raised them from the dead. The Abkhazian double of Ara and Mušel, who resurrected with the help of dogs, was called Aslan ‘Lion,’ see in detail Petrosyan 2002: 88f.).

This motif is usual in the ancient culture of Mesopotamia, where it first appears on proto-Elamite seals and has later manifestations in antiquity (e.g., in Persia and Asia Minor). In the culture of Armenia, the motif of the lion tearing a bull is first attested to on a silver vessel from Karashamb (according to the most recent chronology, of the end of the 3rd millennium BC)²⁹ and occurs on sculptures down to the late Middle Ages.³⁰

HALDI AND THE ARMENIAN MIHR

In Armenia, Mihr was identified with Hephaestus (*Xorenac'i* II.14) and certainly was not the sun god, thus differing from the Iranian Mithra/Mihr (which beyond the borders of Armenia was identified with Helios, Hermes, and Apollo). The Armenian Mihr was regarded as the son of the supreme god Aramazd (Agat'angelos 790), the father and the patriarch of the gods. Aramazd was identified with Zeus and, like the latter, was called "thunderer" (*Xorenac'i* II.86). As the thunder god's son, Mihr is comparable with Mher the Elder, whose father Sanasar, the first possessor of the "lightning sword," represents the figure of the thunder god.³¹

The main cults of Armenia Major (Greater Armenia) were concentrated far from the Urartian centers, in three adjacent districts of the Upper Armenia province. The center of Mihr was in the district of Derjan of that province, in the village of Bagayarič (cf. Iran. *bag-* 'god'). Here, as it seems, the remains of the ancient temple of Mihr still survive.³²

This district was on the border between Armenia Major and Armenia Minor and adjacent to the border of Pontus in the north. It was there that the tribe called Chaldians (*Chaldaioi*) in Greek sources and *Xaltik'* in Armenian sources lived. According to Strabo, the Armenians won Derjan back from the Chalybes and Mossynoics; Chalybes was the old denomination of the Chaldians (XI.14.5; XII.3.19). It is not inconceivable that the god Mihr of the northwest of Armenia, like Mher of the south, was connected with the pre-Iranian onomastic element *xald/t-*.³³

²⁹ Cf. Oganisyan 1988: 146, 151.

³⁰ H. Petrosyan 2001: 73.

³¹ For Sanasar, as the epic version of the thunder god, see Abeghian 1966: 414; Petrosyan 2002: 21f.

³² Russell 1994: 183 f.

³³ Discussion of the theory of a possible relationship between the Chaldians and the Urartian elite lies beyond our immediate concern (see Petrosyan 2006a: 58 ff, 66 ff.)

HALDI AND MITRA/MITHRA

**Mitra* is an Indo-Iranian god. His name means “friend, friendship” in Indian and “agreement, treaty” in Iranian. In Ancient Indian tradition, he formed a complementary pair with Varuna contrasting him in binary oppositions: light-darkness, fire-water, male-female etc.³⁴ In Iranian tradition, Varuna was replaced by Ahura Mazda. Being initially connected with the light, fire and the sun, in early Iranian tradition Mithra accompanied the sun, the greatest of all fires, and controlled those who kept or broke agreements. Subsequently, as the embodiment of adherence to agreement, he was worshipped as the god of war supporting the righteous and destroying those who broke covenants. Zoroaster rejected the cult of Mithra and the other gods except for Ahura Mazda. In the inscriptions of the Achaemenid king Darius I (reigned 522-486 BC) and his first successors, only *Auramazda* (= Ahura Mazda) is mentioned. The cult of Mithra and other gods was legalized by Artaxerxes II (reigned 404-359 BC). In the Parthian period, when the western cult of Mithra emerged, he was the sun god in Iran identified with Apollo and Helios.³⁵

Only some of the characteristics of the Western Mithras can be certainly connected with Iranian tradition: the agreement with the rival and the relationship with the sun (however, we should take into account that the Western Mithras, unlike his Parthian namesake, initially was not the sun god). There are other Iranisms as well (e.g., “Persian” was the fifth degree of initiation). The rest is obviously different: e.g., the birth of the god from the rock, the slaying of the bull, and Near Eastern themes.

When did the syncretization of Mithra/Mihr with Haldi start? Only the form Mihr occurs in Armenian sources; it could have been borrowed in the Parthian period. The form *Mithras* is mentioned in the Greek inscriptions of Armawir (2nd century BC),³⁶ indicating that this god was known in Armenia by his old name as well. As stated above, I.M. Diakonoff dated the identification of Haldi with Mihr to the Achaemenian or later periods. Nevertheless, there is some evidence allowing us to suppose that the identification of the two deities could have taken place earlier.

Mitra is first attested to in the 14th century BC in the list of the Mitannian gods (corresponding to the ancient Indian Mitra, Varuna and Nasatyas). The language of the Mitannian or Mesopotamian Aryans, which initially constituted the ruling elite of the Hurrians, is usually regarded as an Indian dialect. According to I.M. Diakonoff, those

³⁴ Dumézil 1986: 57-58.

³⁵ See, e.g., Boyce 1987: 16-18; Toporov 1982; Rak 1998: 490.

³⁶ See, e.g., Trever 1953: 86, 134..

Aryans lived near Lake Urmia in the 18th-17th centuries BC. From there the tribe Mitanni (*maitanne* = Greek *matiēnoi*) headed by the dynasty of Aryan origin moved southwest and founded their kingdom at the place of the Hurrian state Hanigalbat in northern Mesopotamia.³⁷ The cult center of Haldi, the city of Ardini/Musasir southwest of Lake Urmia might have been within those Aryans' sphere of influence. Thus, theoretically it cannot be excluded that the syncretization of Haldi and Mitra began in the 2nd millennium BC.

The Iranian tribes, too, most probably, were present in the territories adjacent to Lake Urmia since ancient times. Supposedly, it was from there that the Persians, under the oppression of the Medes, Assyrians and Urartians, moved south led by Achaemenes (c.a. 705-675 BC) and established the Persian state.³⁸ Probable traces of Indo-Iranian onomastics are attested in the cult of Haldi and the region of Ardini/Musasir since the Urartian times.³⁹

Nevertheless, the Persians started to rule over Armenia from the time of Darius I. Xerxes I, son of Darius I, reports in his inscription on the rock of Van that his father had prepared the place for the inscription himself but could not accomplish his purpose.⁴⁰ We may conjecture that the complex of the rock of Van made a strong impression on those Achaemenids.

The significant cultural influence of Urartu (including the complex of the rock of Van) over Achaemenian Iran is a well-known fact. As to the religious sphere, the Achaemenian temple architecture is borrowed from Urartu.⁴¹ The most widespread type of Urartian sanctuaries was the "Gate of Haldi." Possibly, the temples of Haldi too were called "Doors of Haldi."⁴² The ancient Armenian *mehean* "heathen temple"

³⁷ Diakonoff 1968: 42-45; Diakonoff 1970: 61; Bongard-Levin 1988: 71; see also Avetisyan 1984: 39; Avetisyan 2002: 21.

³⁸ See e.g. Schmitt 1985: 415; Schmitt 1987: 685.

³⁹ As noted above, Mithra and Ahuramazda correspond to the Indian pair Mithra and Varuna who in the context of binary oppositions are associated with the male and female principles respectively. The name of the Mitannian Varuna occurs in two forms: Uruwana- and Aruna-, which may correspond to the name of Haldi's wife Uarubani/ 'Aruba(i)ni attested since the end of the 9th century BC (Urart. 'a, ba = wa, va). The first traces of Iranian onomastics are found in the region of the cult of Haldi from the second half of the 8th century BC (e.g., the name Urzana of the king of Ardini/Musasir is possibly of Iranian origin). In this same period, the name of Haldi's wife is mentioned as Bagmaštu (or: Bagbartu) in Assyrian sources. Its first part may correspond to the Iranian *baga-* 'god,' while the second is reminiscent of the second element of Ahura Mazda. For this interpretation of the names of Varubani and Bagmaštu, see Hmayakyan 1990: 110-111, n. 87 and Petrosyan 2002: 92, 126; for the Iranian elements in this region, see, e.g., Grantovskij 1970: 298ff.; Burney 1993.

⁴⁰ Kent 1953: 152-153.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Girshman 1962; Tiratsyan 1964; Stronach 1967; Salvini 1995: 150-151.

⁴² Salvini 2001a: 260-261, n. 8, 14.

is connected with one of the variants of Mithra/Mihr's name.⁴³ Apparently, that name was initially related to the temples of Mihr (cf. Lat. *mithraeum*). The New Persian name of Zoroastrian sanctuaries, *Dar-i Mihr* ‘Door of Mihr,’ attested to only in the Islamic epoch, can also be regarded as a remote echo of the “Gates of Haldi.”

HISTORY AND RECONSTRUCTION

From ancient times, the cult of the deity (re)born from the rock/stone was spread in the Armenian Highland, Transcaucasia, and the neighboring regions of Asia Minor. His descendants are the main characters of the myths, epics and legends of those regions. They are the “Caucasian Prometheuses” imprisoned in mountains: Arm. Artawazd and Mher, Georg. Amirani, Abkhaz. Abraskil, et al. The protagonists of the Nart epics:⁴⁴ Abkhaz. Sasryqwa, Adygh. Sosruqo, Osset. Soslan, et al. should also be listed among them⁴⁵.

Haldi was such a deity. Hurrian and Urartian are kindred languages. In this context Haldi as a mythological character “born from the rock” corresponds to the Hurrian Ullikummi. The fact that the former was a god and the latter was a monster does not contradict this correspondence. In this respect, one can remember the opposite roles of the derivatives of the Indo-European **deiwo-* in two branches of the Indo-Iranian languages: they were gods in India and monsters in Iran.

Thus, the figure of Haldi could have had indigenous Hurro-Urartian features, which, however, does not mean that the whole worship of Haldi was purely Urartian. First, the character born from the rock is typical of many traditions of the region, irrespective of their linguistic affinity (Hurrian, Phrygian, Armenian, Kartvelian, North Caucasian). Unlike the character, the name Haldi has no evident Hurrian cognates. It first occurs in several Middle and New Assyrian theophoric names (the bearers of those names cannot be identified as Urartians).⁴⁶ Scholars think that Haldi was not part of the

⁴³ See, e.g., Acharyan 1977: 296; Djahukian 1987: 534 (the ending is explained in different ways).

⁴⁴ These heroes have been compared with Gk. Prometheus, Iran. Aži Dahāka, Phryg. Agdistis, Serb. Marko, Nord. Loki, Sveigðr (one can continue this list: cf., e.g., the characters of Iran. Isfandiar, Rus. Sviatogor, Germ. Hrungnir et al.). For Mher and his parallels, see, e.g., Abeghian 1966: 144-153; Avdalbegyan 1969; Adontz 1948; Melik-Ohandzanyan 1946; Chikovani 1966; Dalgal 1972; Boyle 1975; Ardzinba 1985, Charachidzé 1986; Petrosyan 2002; Tomashevich 2007.

⁴⁵ Especially interesting is Sosruqo. This fiery hero is born from the stone fecundated by a shepherd. He finds fire for the Narts, gives them the seeds of millet and the intoxicating drink. He is endowed with features of solar deity; after his death he continues to live underground and strives for breaking away from there. Some of his traits are more similar to those of Artawazd (if he frees himself and appears on the earth, the soil will no longer be fertile), see, e.g., Mizhaev 1982, Brojdo 1936: 30-33.

⁴⁶ For those names, see Tallqvist 1914: 83; Saporetti 1970: 283; Freydank 1976: 87.

ancient heritage of the Urartians and was introduced into the Urartian pantheon by another tribe: he was the supreme god of the Urartian state but not the ethnic god of the Urartians.⁴⁷

Haldi became the head of the state pantheon of Urartu as a result of the political activities of King Išpuini⁴⁸ (late 9th century BC), whose family originated probably from Ardini/Musasir. The figure of Haldi was ideologized and transformed, if we may say so, into a political program,⁴⁹ and Išpuini's successors strenuously continued transplanting that cult into the conquered lands of the Armenian Highland. In the process of supposed syncretization with the local version of Mitra and ideologization the cult of Haldi was significantly changed and had important characteristics extrinsic for Ancient Near Eastern cults.⁵⁰

It seems that in early Armenian tradition Haldi was identified with Ara the Handsome. A badly preserved passage by the continuator of the 10th century historiographer T'ovma Arcruni (IV.18) makes assume that the resurrection of Ara the Handsome was localized around the Lezuoy (later Lezk') village (3-4 kilometers north of Van). Subsequently recorded legends narrate that the Amenap'rkič ('Savior of All') chapel of the village, situated on the rock, was built at the place of a heathen temple. It was in this temple that the Aralezk' licked and cured the sick and the dead, and it was here that Šamiram put Ara's body.⁵¹

An inscription of Išpuini from Lezk' witnesses to the construction of a stronghold at the place of that village, as well as another building referred to by the ideogram É ("house"). In N.V. Harutyunyan's opinion, that building was a *susi* temple.⁵² In general, the ideogram É meant both secular and worship buildings. The latter, as the *susi* temples, were almost always dedicated to the god Haldi. Thus, it seems probable that there existed a temple of Haldi at the place of the village Lezk', where subsequently Haldi was identified with Ara the Handsome.

Haldi, like the other local deities, was renamed Mithra/Mihr, adopting the name of the Iranian god. In this identification a major role could have played Haldi's supposed earlier syn-

⁴⁷ Salvini 1989: 83-85. In his discussion of the Hurrian and Urartian pantheons, Diakonoff writes (1981: 82): "Haldi seems to be a newcomer in the pantheon, which we hope to demonstrate in another article." That article, as far as we know, has never been published.

⁴⁸ Salvini 1987: 405; Salvini 1989: 83-85; Salvini 1995: 39; see also Hmayakyan 1994.

⁴⁹ Salvini 1989: 86

⁵⁰ For instance, no ancient empire except Urartu attempted to introduce the cult of her supreme god into every conquered town; no other important Oriental deity (except probably Yahve) lacked temple economy; a statue of an ancient Oriental deity could normally exist only in its home temple, but Haldi's home lay altogether outside of the imperial Urartian territory; no statues were erected in the numerous new sanctuaries, and the rites were performed before a stela, a tree, etc.: see Diakonoff 1983: 303.

⁵¹ Srvandzyantz 1978: 52; Abeghian 1985: 248 ff.

⁵² KUKN 19.

cretization with the Mitannian Aryan Mitra, as well as their common characteristics (e.g., connection with fire and war).

The figures of Mher and the Western Mithras have several common traits, which are not evident in the figure of Haldi and, at least partly, can be explained by the later development (for example the figure of the horseman Mher inside the rock, the two candles burning beside him, the wheel of Fortune whirling before him).⁵³

According to Pseudo-Plutarch (3rd century AD), Mithras, hating women, impregnated a rock, which gave birth to Diorphos. He was slain by Ares and transformed into a mountain located near the Araxes River (*De Fluiorum et montium nominibus*, XXIII, 4).⁵⁴ Here the characters of heroes have been mixed: Mithras' son is born from the rock instead of him. However, this myth witnesses to the localization of the Western Mithras' birth in Armenia.⁵⁵

The main center of the state cult of Mihr in Armenia Major was situated at the Upper Euphrates, close to the border with Pontus. It was in Pontus that the Chaldians lived, and only in Pontus the majority of the kings were called Mithridates (the most famous of them was Mithridates VI Eupator, father-in-law of Tigran the Great).

The first factual testimonies to the cult of Mithras are connected with the garrison Carnuntum in Pannonia (present-day Hungary), where in 71 and 72 AD the legion XV Apollinaris was stationed.⁵⁶ This legion, which gave rise to the western Mithraism, in 63 AD was sent to Armenia to support Corbulo.⁵⁷ There, at the junction of the Euphrates and Aratsani (Murat) Rivers, where the Romans under the command of Petus had been defeated by the Parthians, Corbulo concluded a peace treaty with Tiridates, who was to receive the crown of Armenia from Nero (Tacitus, *Annales* XV.26-29). Apparently, the soldiers of that legion could have become familiar with the religion of Mithra in Armenia.⁵⁸

The cult of Mithra in the northwest of Armenia Major, like the cults of other gods of that region, did not leave prominent inheritors in the Armenian folklore. Whereas Haldi of the south, renamed Mher, became the prototype of two heroes of the great epic of Sasun.

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⁵³ For those parallels, see, e.g., Boyle 1978: 73.

⁵⁴ This mountain can be identified with Mount Ararat where, according to the epic "Vipasank," King Artawazz is imprisoned.

⁵⁵ Widengren 1966: 444.

⁵⁶ According to Plutarch (*Vit. Pomp.* 24), the cult of Mithra was first brought to Italy by the Cilician pirates. This information seems to be correct, but these first "Mithraists" of the West, apparently, had no successors.

⁵⁷ Cumont 1956: 47 f.

⁵⁸ See also Daniels 1975: 251; Russell 1987: 261ff.; Russell 1994.

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